

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM**

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name: Colonial Theatre

other names/site number VDHR # 301-5054

2. Location

street & number 220 South Mecklenburg Avenue not for publication
city or town South Hill vicinity
state Virginia code VA county Mecklenburg code 117 Zip 23970

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide X locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official Date

Virginia Department of Historic Resources

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:

 entered in the National Register

 See continuation sheet.

 determined eligible for the

National Register

Signature of Keeper

 See continuation sheet.

 determined not eligible for the National Register

Date of Action

 removed from the National Register

 other (explain): _____

7. Description**Architectural Classification** (Enter categories from instructions)Commercial Style**Materials** (Enter categories from instructions)foundation concreteroof metalwalls brick

other _____

Narrative Description (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)**8. Statement of Significance****Applicable National Register Criteria** (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- ☒ A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

- ☐ A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ B removed from its original location.
- ☐ C a birthplace or a grave.
- ☐ D a cemetery.
- ☐ E a reconstructed building, object or structure.
- ☐ F a commemorative property.
- ☐ G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)Entertainment/RecreationArchitecture

Period of Significance 1925-1948

Significant Dates 1925

1933

1948

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Cultural Affiliation _____

Architect/Builder _____

Narrative Statement of Significance (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS)

____ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.

____ previously listed in the National Register

_____ previously determined eligible by the National Register

designated a National Historic Landmark

recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #

recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

Primary Location of Additional Data

X State Historic Preservation Office

____ Other State agency

Federal agency

Local government

University

Other

Name of repository: _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property . 34 acres

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

Zone Easting Northing Zone Easting Northing

1 17 756240 4067965 2

3 4

See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Alison Stone Blanton

Organization: Hill Studio, P.C. date 1/9/03

street & number: 120 West Campbell Avenue telephone 540-342-5263

city or town Roanoke state VA zip code 24011

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Mr. Earl O. Horne, South Hill Community Development Association, Inc.

street & number 211 South Mecklenburg Avenue telephone 434-447-3191

city or town South Hill state VA zip code 23970

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Colonial Theatre
Mecklenburg Co., VA

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7. Summary Description:

The Colonial Theatre is a three-story brick building located on U.S. Route 58 Business and U.S. Route 1 in the central business district of the Town of South Hill in Mecklenburg County, Virginia. Constructed in 1925 in the Commercial Style, the building stands as the tallest structure in the downtown area near the intersection of Mecklenburg and Danville streets and serves as a gateway to the main thoroughfare through South Hill. The Colonial Theatre was originally built to house live entertainment, including vaudeville and music productions, and later served to show silent movies and modern motion pictures. In addition to the lobby and theatre auditorium, the three-story (14,571 square foot) brick structure with a clipped corner also included the post office at one time in the ground floor storefront as well as office space and a social hall on the upper floors.

Exterior

Designed in the Commercial Style with a variety of elements from the late 19th and early 20th century American movement, the building features a prominent parapet wall with a wide overhanging eave supported by brackets. A row of stone tablets below the eaves further accentuates the roofline. Wide expanses of 1/1, double-hung sash windows with a transom also dominate the front (east) façade. These windows, grouped in twos and threes, extend around the clipped corner and the north side façade. Large storefront windows with transoms extend along both facades at the ground level. Double-leaf, single-light wood doors with a transom provide entrance to the retail space on the ground floor from the clipped corner. The entrance to the theatre lobby along the front façade has been altered, consisting now of a single-leaf, six-panel door and infilled paneling. Patterned dark red brickwork and contrasting light stone corner blocks around the windows and tablets serve to enliven the façade. The theatre section of the building features solid sidewalls of common brick with a gabled roof over the auditorium and a flat roof over the stage and fly-tower area.

Interior

The interior of the building features an entrance vestibule, hallway, lobby, auditorium with balcony, and stage in the theatre section. A side staircase and an upper-level staircase provide access to the office spaces on the 2nd floor and the meeting hall on the 3rd floor. Interior finishes include ceramic tile floors, wood paneling in the vestibule and lobby, and pressed tin ceilings. A large, molded proscenium arch frames the stage and small orchestra pit. The original metal seats

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with decorative stanchions on the aisle seats remain intact. Acoustical tiles have been applied to the side walls of the theatre. Stairs along the north side lead from the lobby to the balcony. The office spaces have hardwood floors, plaster walls, and pressed tin ceilings. Simple molded trim surrounds the horizontal paneled interior doors and single-light transoms.

Integrity

The building retains a high level of integrity. With the exception of the entrance to the theatre, the original design and materials remain intact on the exterior. The roof over the stage and auditorium was in deteriorated condition causing extensive damage to the interior. The roof was recently replaced with a standing seam metal roof similar in design to the original. The interior retains its original plan, design and materials for the most part. Some new paneling and enclosures (ca. 1940) have been added to the lobby area. The auditorium and stage as well as some areas of the office space have deteriorated due to water damage from the leaking roof.

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8. Statement of Significance

The Colonial Theatre in South Hill, Virginia, was built in 1925 by Gilbert A. Saunders and was the only theater in the Mecklenburg County area for over two decades. Designed in the Commercial Style, the three-story, brick building stands as the tallest building in South Hill and serves as a visual gateway near the intersection of Mecklenburg and Danville streets, the two major thoroughfares of the downtown area. In addition to the theater space, the building housed the post office in the storefront with clipped corner entrance as well as offices on the 2nd floor and a Masonic meeting hall on the top floor. This additional, revenue-producing space was typical of theater design in the early 20th century as it allowed for better use of the important street frontage of the building. Originally constructed to house live entertainment, such as vaudeville and musical productions, the theater progressed with the times showing silent movies and modern motion pictures. Although not as elaborate as many of the early 20th century movie palaces, the Colonial was well appointed with ceramic tile floors, wood paneled walls and pressed metal ceilings. The large proscenium arch of molded plaster around the stage area gives a sense of grandeur to the space. The building continued in the ownership of the Saunders-Montgomery family from its construction until 2001, when it was sold to the present owners. The building was closely tied to the community as evidenced by a successful appeal to the public for support in the hard times of the 1930s and numerous civic-minded promotions such as "Tin Can" movies and free admission for scrap iron during World War II. The Colonial Theatre is eligible for listing on the National Register under criteria A and C with significance on the local level in the areas of entertainment/recreation and architecture for the period 1925 to 1948.

Historical Background

The Town of South Hill in Mecklenburg County developed at the turn of the century with the arrival of the Atlantic and Danville Railroad in 1892. Railroad financiers and engineers laid out the 56-acre town in a 1-1/4 mile circle around the depot and the town was incorporated in 1901 (Bracey, 1977:361). Situated in a region rich in tobacco and lumber resources, the town grew quickly as a shipping and manufacturing center. In 1901 there were two tobacco warehouses selling 1,600,000 pounds of tobacco. Within one year, the warehouses had expanded and a third warehouse was built as well as several prizeeries and sales reached 3 million pounds. By 1903, the town consisted of 17 businesses, three hotels, fifteen dwellings, and four warehouses (Bracey: 363). The South Hill Manufacturing Company was established in 1905 to manufacture wood products. By 1908 South

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Hill ranked as the third largest flue-cured tobacco market in the state and had a population of 750 (Bracey: 361, Sanborn, 1908). The town continued to grow as a tobacco market, manufacturing, and shipping center located at the strategic intersection of the National Highway (south from Washington, DC, later U.S. Route 1) and the Norfolk – Southwest Highway to Danville (U.S. Route 58). By 1926, when the Colonial Theatre was operating, the population had increased to 1,400 and the town consisted of three hotels, five smaller inns, one movie theater (Colonial), five garages, three cafes, two filling stations, 38 stores, and five factories (Nanney: 53).

The Colonial Theatre was built in 1925 by Gilbert A. Saunders, a prominent local citizen who also built the Hotel Lincoln in town. The theater replaced an earlier 1913 frame movie house and bowling alley on Mecklenburg Avenue that had burned (Nanney: 43). Designed in the Commercial Style, the prominent brick structure served as the only theater in the area of Mecklenburg County for over two decades. Various well-known entertainers performed at the Colonial, including Joan Crawford, Clara Bow, Louise Homer, Vilma Banky, Ronald Colman, Tex Ritter, Minnie Pearl, and Jack Ritchie and the Texas Rhythm Rangers. These names and others are listed in various advertisements for the theater as printed at the time in the local newspaper, *The South Hill Enterprise*.

Just as the Atlantic and Danville Railroad (later the Norfolk, Franklin and Danville Railroad and the Norfolk & Western Railway) made possible the development of South Hill, it also made possible the vast number of performances held at the Colonial. The railroad tracks ran parallel to the theater building just one block north and served as the transportation source for these traveling stage performers, opera singers, musicians and orchestras. The Lincoln Hotel, also built by Saunders, was located across the street from the theater and conveniently provided lodging. Unconfirmed rumors suggest that there was a tunnel under the street connecting the theater and hotel.

Designed to house live performances, including vaudeville and music productions, the building also included retail and office space as well as a meeting hall on the 3rd floor. This strategy of design allowed for better use of the valuable street front space of the building. The prominence of the building is evident in the early tenants that included the local post office on the first floor (with entrance from the clipped corner) and the local Masonic Lodge on the top floor. Insurance agents and lawyers were typical tenants of the office spaces on the 2nd floor.

The Colonial Theatre building played an important role in the community of South Hill. In the
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1930s the theater promoted a public clean-up campaign by sponsoring “Tin Can Movies” on Fridays when free admission was granted to children bringing in 25 tin cans (Nanney: 61). When the *South Hill Enterprise* announced in 1932 that the theater was not doing well financially and Saunders planned to close the Colonial, overwhelming public support convinced Saunders to keep it open (Nanney: 55). In response, Saunders remodeled the theater in 1933 and installed a new screen as well as lighting and sound systems. The Colonial Theatre also supported the war effort in the early 1940s offering free admission for donations of scrap iron (Nanney: 107). The decline of the Colonial Theatre began in 1948 when the former manager, C.W. Geoghegan, opened The Star as a competing theater on North Mecklenburg Avenue (Nanney: 112). In 1948, the Y.M.C.A. moved into the building (Nanney: 114) and it continued to serve as a community facility. Numerous school and community organizations have used the Colonial Theatre as a meeting and performance hall over the years.

The Saunders and Montgomery families (Gilbert A. Saunders’ daughter, Ruby, married into the Montgomery family) owned the Colonial Theatre from its construction until 2001. These two families were closely tied to South Hill. Saunders built the Hotel Lincoln as well as the Colonial and the Montgomery family built Montgomery Drug Company as the first brick commercial structure in South Hill in 1904-1906 (Nanney: 26). Henry S. Montgomery, grandson of the builder, served as mayor of South Hill from 1963-1980 while also managing the Colonial and practicing law from his offices there.

The Colonial Theatre stands as an excellent example of a 1920s theater and office building constructed in Southside Virginia. Of the approximately 60 theaters surveyed to date in Virginia, 40 date to the period between World War I and World War II. Seventeen of those theaters were constructed in the 1920s, the period identified as the “golden age of movie palaces.” Ten theaters, ranging from the late 1900s to the mid-20th century and located throughout the state, have been individually listed to date on the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places. Numerous others serve as contributing buildings in historic districts. Architecturally, they serve as anchors to their streetscapes as well-designed buildings for public enjoyment. The role of these theaters in cities and towns across the state cannot be overemphasized as they provided entertainment, imaginative escape, and exposure to the culture of the world around them. Although modest in design compared to some of the more elaborate theaters in larger cities, the size and location of the Colonial Theatre as well as the finishes in its public spaces speak to the prominence of the building in the town of South Hill.

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9. Bibliography

Bracey, Susan L., *Life by the Roanoke River: A History of Mecklenburg County, Virginia*, Mecklenburg, VA: The Mecklenburg County Bicentennial Commission, 1977.

Hall, Ben M., *The best Remaining Seats*, New York: Bramhall House, 1961.

Hill Directory Company, *South Hill, Virginia City Directory*, 1959.

Montgomery, Vin, Telephone Interview, January 8, 2003.

Nanney, Frank L., Jr., *South Hill, Virginia: A Chronology of the First 100 Years*, Winston-Salem, NC: Frank L. Nanney, Jr., 2001.

Sanborn Map Company, *Insurance Maps of South Hill, Virginia*, 1908-1939.

Sharp, Dennis. *The Picture Palace*, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1969.

Southside Planning District Commission, *Preliminary Information Form: Colonial Theatre*, January 2002.

Virginia Department of Historic Resources Archives. Richmond, Virginia.

10. Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description

The Colonial Theatre is identified as parcel number 055A on the tax parcel map 078A17-A for the Town of South Hill, Virginia.

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the one building known as the Colonial Theatre at the corner of Mecklenburg Avenue and Pine Lane in South Hill, Virginia and represents all property and buildings associated with the Colonial Theatre.

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Section Photographs **Page** 7

The following information is the same for all photographs:

Property: The Colonial Theatre
Location: South Hill, Virginia
Photographer: Alison Blanton, Hill Studio, PC
Negatives Filed: The Virginia Department of Historic Resources, Richmond, Virginia

Photo 1 of 12

View: Mecklenburg Avenue, looking NW
Date: 9/02
Negative #: 20123

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View: Danville Street, looking NW
Date: 9/02
Negative #: 20123

Photo 3 of 12

View: Entrance Vestibule
Date: 9/02
Negative #: 20123

Photo 4 of 12

View: Lobby
Date: 9/02
Negative #: 20123

Photo 5 of 12

View: Stage from balcony
Date: 9/02
Negative #: 20123

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View: Proscenium Arch, left side
Date: 9/02
Negative #: 20123

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View: Balcony
Date: 9/02
Negative #: 20123

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View: Theater seat
Date: 9/02
Negative #: 20123

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View: Staircase to offices
Date: 9/02
Negative #: 20123

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View: 2nd Floor Offices
Date: 9/02
Negative #: 20123

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View: 2nd floor office
Date: 5/02
Negative #: 20306

Photo 12 of 12

View: 3rd Floor Masonic Meeting Hall
Date: 5/02
Negative #: 20306